

Have you ever done something that was uncomfortable? You know, that feeling of being scared, with a pit in your stomach? And yet, you jumped in anyway.

Let me tell you about some discomfort this summer, where I initially forgot what was really important—until I was on mile five of a local road race, on a fishing trip in Alaska, and staring at an off-grid week away in the Provincetown dune shacks. At the onset of each, I felt that pit in my stomach, saying I shouldn't, I couldn't, and I won't. I thought they were traps.

To start, this past spring I was staring down a room of senior volunteers at a local charity, Hospitality Homes, which provides housing to families of loved ones going through critical medical procedures in Boston. I was asked to run a local road race to fund their work, and immediately I was afraid of failing—not behind curtains, but in front of thousands of people. I almost missed the entire point of the race because I was so focused on my own discomfort, rather than the funds I'd raise to support a child at Boston Children's Hospital who needed a heart transplant.

Or when my traveling physical therapist bestie called me crying of loneliness and needing emotional support, I wanted to isolate rather than take a risk to be there for someone who needed me. As someone who lives with anxiety and insomnia, traveling often feels overwhelming. Yet when I went, I had no idea how I'd count my blessings after spending a day fishing with her alongside a married couple from Michigan actively going through cancer treatment. They taught me what real perspective looks like.

And finally, I was drenched in sweat as we drove through the sand dunes in Provincetown. I resisted my friend's idea of entering a lottery to spend an off-grid week in the old artist dune shacks without power or electricity. I couldn't focus on anything except what I had known PTown to be: a queer haven. The idea of trading that familiar environment for meditative isolation felt like abandoning my community. But looking ahead to that quiet time, I realized my initial instinct wasn't gratitude—it was panic and self-preservation. I'm no longer afraid—I'm excited for what God and I will talk about.

Our lives run on routine, which constricts us. Tennessee Williams, who spent significant time living in those very PTown Dune Shacks, wrote in *Orpheus Descending*: "Nobody knows nobody. We're all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins for life." What's the scariest thing you have ever done? I bet you survived. You made it here today, to one of the top

universities in the world, because of your courage and intelligence. The act of getting into college is one of both freedom and fright. We applied to a multitude of schools, hoping we'd get in. But you made it. Doesn't that prove that the most meaningful experiences carry both hardship and reward?

College forces you to step outside your "home skin" and self-actualize. We go to that first party, apply for endless internships, and ask out that person in class. For some of you, living authentically here at BU might be happening for the very first time in your lives.

These experiences aren't that different from two BU Hillel spring break volunteer trips: in 2015 to Oaxaca, Mexico and in 2018 to Durban, South Africa. Both trips were far away, working with partner organizations we had never met for a week of unknown volunteer work. We labored during the day to refurbish communities, while connecting with local residents at night. What I remember most were not the perceived traps, but the sacred moments—like sitting in the dirt after building a greenhouse in South Africa with Josh, a Sephardic Orthodox Jew from NY, and Devin, a Black Christian BU student leader. In our sweaty clothes, we spoke about faith, why we were there, and what God thought of our week abroad. Sitting in the South African sun allowed us to laugh, think, and talk in a way we never could back in Boston.

The High Holidays ask who we want to be when we face an unwritten future. Rosh Hashanah sits right on the threshold between everything familiar from our past and an entire year of uncertainty ahead. It asks us to step across that line without a map. As the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks famously wrote: "Faith is not certainty; faith is the courage to live with uncertainty." Walking into a new year isn't about knowing how every step will turn out—it's about having the willingness to step forward, trust the journey, and say yes.

That willingness to lean in is the core of the Jewish story. Think about Jacob, whose journey involved wrestling with angels and deceiving his blind father Isaac for a blessing. Or Joseph's brothers, who cast him away only to seek his mercy years later. Our tradition doesn't give us flawless heroes; it gives us people who navigate real speedbumps along the way. We are taught to lean in, knowing that no journey—and no person—is perfect.

You each are on a journey as BU students. We are afraid of choosing the wrong majors, being friendless on the weekends, or being rejected on dating apps. One of my students, call her Sally, came into my office a few years ago. On the outside, she was an accomplished, confident junior from Long Island. She applied for a Hillel volunteer trip and revealed she knew nobody on

it. She shared that she had spent two years having surface-level friendships, feeling passed over by sororities, and believing she didn't belong anywhere. Yet, when she took that leap, showed up at the airport, and took a chance on a new community, everything shifted—she found her crew, and she finally found her home.

Leaning in allows us to truly experience life, but it can be exhausting. I get it. I have wanted to find my husband since I came out 14 years ago, and at times it feels like an endless search. But trying again, even when it feels hard, is part of the work of living. In moments when keeping hope alive feels difficult, I turn to the courageous words of Rachel Goldberg-Polin, whose son Hersh was tragically taken from us: "Hope is mandatory." If she can hold onto hope, so can we.

I am entering my bar-mitzvah year at BU Hillel—my 13th year. Through thousands of conversations, students often share feelings of not being Jewish enough, educated enough, or leader enough. So many of us—myself included—have felt that way. But the core of Jewish community is growing alongside life's multi-colored experiences and relationships. On my office door hangs a photo from South Africa with Sophie, a student leader from that trip who recently invited me to her wedding. Josh, Devin, Sally, and Sophie all had to step into the unknown—facing language barriers, physical labor, or vulnerable social spaces. They are in my heart, and so are all of you.

Embracing vulnerability isn't just something we practice at Hillel—I see its necessity daily in 12-step recovery programs like AA, NA, and Al-Anon, which help addicts and families affected by addiction. The Serenity Prayer said at every meeting goes: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change what I can, and wisdom to know the difference." We cannot change the past, and we cannot predict the future. We can change our attitudes. We can change our willingness to say yes. And we can leave the rest to a power greater than ourselves, which I choose to call God.

That brings me right back to us here at BU. Everyone asks how to get involved at BU Hillel, but really you are asking how to make friends and find purpose in your lives. Sure, as Hillel's Executive Director, I hope you lean into Jewish community this year, but more than that, I hope your attitude is one of openness to all sorts of experiences and unknowns.

The Jewish story is all about moving forward, saying yes, and trusting. According to tradition, the Red Sea didn't split while the Israelites stood on the shore waiting. It only split after

Nachshon ben Aminadav stepped into the water up to his nostrils. He took the leap into the scary unknown first, and the miracle followed.

This year, may we live in the spirit of our tradition as we walk through the journey of life—not because there aren't discomforts or costs, but because you have so much more to gain than to lose. Let us keep our heads up, our hearts open, and possibilities unlimited. Book that ticket, sign up for that road race, travel to another continent, or say yes to that new friend or experience. Make sure to write me a note and share a snapshot with me. May you be sealed in the book of life, and may you have a sweet, courage-filled, and adventurous year ahead. Shana Tova.